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NOW META, AMAZON NIX DIVERSITY PROGRAMS AHEAD OF JAN 20

Tech giants join Ford, McDonald's, John Deere and Walmart in scaling back their diversity, equity and inclusion programs ahead of Trump inauguration

META OUTLINES SWEEPING CHANGES TO DEI

Meta outlined widespread changes, including elimination of its diverse slate hiring approach and the disbanding of its DEI team in an internal memo, which was leaked online. The move by US companies comes after recent Supreme Court decisions on how courts will approach DEI going ahead. Amazon said it is winding down outdated programs

DEI INVITES IRE IN THE LOS ANGELES WILDFIRE

- Besides the SC decision, the move by companies comes as Trump, who has long riled against tech giants for being biased towards him, is set to become the president
- Elon Musk targeted DEI during the Los Angeles wildfire. He said, "They prioritised DEI over saving lives and homes"

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ANTI-DEI BILLS IN COLLEGES WHICH HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED IN 28 STATES

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

NTA exams may go UPSC way for better security

Would involve DM, SP to make the process of conducting entrance tests fully secure

KAVITA BAJELI-DATT @New Delhi

THE government is mulling to conduct all entrance exams to higher education institutions (HEIs) using the UPSC model to ensure strict security and avoid any future allegations of cheating and mismanagement, highly placed sources said.

The Union education ministry is considering this approach so as to involve all state and district administrations during the entrance exams, which will be conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA). "Now, the government is thinking of conducting all entrance exams to HEIs using the UPSC model. The UPSC model means the district administration and the state government are involved in the entrance exam process," the source told this paper.

UPSC exam centres are heavily secured by district administrations, with the collector and superintendent of police involved in the entire process. The government is looking at applying the same rigour for conducting various entrance exams, which include CUET-UG, CUET-PG, JEE-MAINS, and NEET-UG. NEET-UG was mired in controversy following allegations of cheating and mismanagement last year.

The source said the entire state administration is involved in the UPSC exams. "This will help make the entire exam procedure much more secure as the state administration will be part of the process. The government's thinking is to conduct all exams related to admission in such a fashion. Also, the state administration will feel part of the exam system."

The plan to adopt the UPSC model was discussed following the recommendation of the committee led by former ISRO Chairman Dr K Radhakrishnan. The committee was set up to suggest exam reforms, better security protocols, and their operation by the education ministry following the NEET-UG fiasco.

Last month, Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan had announced that NTA will focus solely on conducting entrance exams for admission to higher education institutions. The idea was to make the system "error-free".

Why big reforms

A series of reforms are being undertaken so as to make NTA a globally-recognised exam body. "NTA handles one crore students. This is huge as compared to any other country. It will increase," the source said

To relocate tribals or not? K'taka forest officials face devil or deep sea dilemma

BOSKY KHANNA @Bengaluru

KARNATAKA forest officials face the predicament of being between the devil and the deep sea over implementing the tribal relocation programme, protecting forests from becoming townships, and reducing man-animal conflict. They can neither implement the Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's November 2024 orders to provide facilities (roads, power, water, sewage lines, educational institutions and BPL cards) to tribals inside forest areas; nor are they able to follow the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and Forest, Environment and Ecology department minister Eshwar Khandre directions to relocate tribals under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

A tribal hamlet inside a forest in South Kodagu | EXPRESS

Forest officials have to choose between being a tool of political appeasement of providing facilities to tribals within the forests or face legal action against them if they do not relocate them. "On one hand, if forest officers do not implement the FRA, it leads to a rise in man-animal conflict, but if they succumb to political pressure they are slapped with Lokayukta cases like it happened in Shivamogga where a complaint was filed against forest officials for not evicting people from 3,111 acres of forest land in Sagar and Soraba taluks. They are also threatened with criminal proceedings by MLAs for not providing essential amenities to tribals inside the forests, as was the case in South Kodagu," pointed a petitioner, fighting a case in Supreme Court, challenging the extent of land and grants to tribals in forests.

Former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF), BK Singh, said now the bigger problem is preventing the already relocated tribals from returning. Tribal families that were relocated during 2008-2012 have started returning to haadis in Nagarhole Tiger Reserve (NTR) and are claiming ownership of lands outside and inside forests.

"Everyone is entitled to good life and facilities, but it should be outside the forests," said a former NTR official. "With drawing of power lines inside forests as part of facilities to be provided to the tribals, elephant electrocution incidents have increased. Tiger-, leopard-human conflicts have also increased. Karnataka government enhanced the compensation to tribals from Rs 10lakh to Rs 15lakh, along with agricultural land and pucca house in the relocation package, but the political will to implement it is lacking now." P9

Maha shift as Uddhav's Sena to go it alone in civic body polls

SUDHIR SURYAVANSHI @Mumbai

IN a seismic shift that threatens to upend Maharashtra's political landscape, the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) has announced its decision to contest the upcoming local body elections on its own.

The decision was conveyed on Saturday by senior leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Raut, who said that the move to go solo has the backing of party chief Uddhav Thackeray and is meant to preserve the party's organisational growth and provide more opportunities for its workers. "We are confident in our strength and will fight the elections on our own ... whatever happens, will happen," he said.

The development raises questions about the future of the MVA coalition, particularly in light of the recent drubbing in the Maharashtra assembly elections, which saw the MVA suffer a humiliating defeat. The Shiv Sena (UBT) bagged just 9.96% of the vote share, a drop from the 16.72% it got in the Lok Sabha elections six months earlier.

The Congress has welcomed Shiv Sena (UBT)'s decision, with leaders citing the challenges of transferring votes between parties.

A senior Maharashtra Congress leader, speaking on condition of anonymity, acknowledged difficulties in securing votes from Shiv Sena (UBT) supporters, adding that the party now sees an opportunity for growth and expansion.

ROOF COLLAPSE AT U.P. STATION SITE

Rescue operation under way at Kannauj railway station after an under-construction building collapsed injuring 23 labourers. Six have been rescued, with three sustaining critical injuries. The incident happened around 2.30 pm on Saturday, when the shutter collapsed during casting of the roof. Officials said around 35 people were working at the site | P11 | P12

EXPRESS READ

18 workers hospitalised after gas leak in Karwar

Karwar: Eighteen workers were hospitalised with respiratory issues following a toxic gas leak at a factory in Binaga, Karwar taluk, Uttara Kannada district, on Saturday. The incident occurred at the caustic soda production unit of Grasim Industries at Binaga.

3 more bodies brought out of Assam mine

Guwahati: Divers on Saturday fished out bodies of three workers from a flooded coal mine in Dima Hasao district, Assam, where they had been trapped since January 6. With this recovery, bodies of four out of the nine workers stuck in the quarry have been found. P12

20 held for horrific rape of Kerala minor, hunt on for 40 more

JAISON WILSON @Pathanamthitta

A day after the shocking revelation that more than 60 people had raped a minor over five years, the police arrested 20 people, including a juvenile. Police have registered six cases, including under the POCSO Act, with more to follow.

Based on the survivor's statement, the police had on Friday arrested five persons.

On Saturday, they arrested 15 more, including a 17-year-old boy. A special investigation team, headed by Pathanamthitta Deputy Superintendent of Police S Nandakumar, is questioning the accused.

The girl, who belongs to a Scheduled Caste community, had revealed her ordeal to the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) members who subsequently informed the police. According to the survivor's account, the sexual abuse began when she was 13, with Subin, the son of her father's friend, luring her into a cycle of sexual exploitation that would continue for years.

When the girl turned 16, Subin took her to a secluded rubber plantation and sexually assaulted her. He also recorded videos of the act on his phone. This was followed by regular sexual abuse, police said.

Subin's actions were enabled by a network of accomplices, who shared explicit visuals and videos of the girl. The perpetrators used the girl's father's mobile phone to communicate with her. Police have identified 40 individuals as potential perpetrators and are working to bring them to book.

District Superintendent of Police V G Vinod Kumar said legal action against the perpetrators will continue.

NCW SEEKS STATUS REPORT IN THREE DAYS

The National Commission for Women has taken cognizance of the case and has directed the state police to submit a report within three days. The survivor is currently receiving counseling and support at a shelter home, police said.

Arms and ammunition that were recovered from a forest near Kittaleguli village in Chikkamagaluru district

Naxals' surrender: Cops recover arms buried in C'magaluru forest

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @Chikkamagaluru

JAYAPURA police on Friday recovered weapons that were buried in a forest near Kittaleguli village in Chikkamagaluru district by six Naxals, who surrendered before Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in Bengaluru a few days ago.

Sub-Inspector Ambareesh of Jayapura police station said one AK 56 assault rifle, three 303 rifles, one 12th bore single barrel gun, and one country-made pistol were recovered from the forest based on a tip-off from an informer.

The police also recovered an empty magazine and 11 bullets of AK 56 rifle, 133 bullets of 303 rifle, 24 12 bore cartridges, and 8 bullets of pistol.

A case has been registered in Jayapura police station under Section 3, 25 (1B) 7 and 25(1 A) of the Arms Act, 1959.

Ambareesh told TNSE that a raid was conducted based on the information given by the informer. Investigations are on to know if the surrendered Naxals had buried more arms and ammunition in the forest.

Mundagaru Latha of Chikkamagaluru district, Vanajakshi Balehole, Sundari of Dakshina Kannada, Jeesha of Wayanad in Kerala, K Vasantha of Tamil Nadu, and Mareppa Aroli had surrendered before Siddaramaiah after the state government offered them a rehabilitation package. P6

SSLC, II PU EXAMS

KSEAB RELEASES TIMETABLES

The first annual examination for II Pre-University courses will be held from March 1 to 20, and the SSLC examination from March 21 to April 4 | P6

SPORTS CONNECT

Fan, fandom & Harish: Cricketing bridge between India & Australia

GOMESH S @Sydney

IN terms of support, the Melbourne Cricket Ground almost looks like any other ground in India. There is a sea of blue in every corner and the din was as loud as one could hear back home. There have been times, especially during practice, when the Indian crowd outnumbered those from the home side Australia. The Border-Gavaskar Trophy is slowly turning out to be one of the most popular bilateral series in cricket. The MCG witnessed history when 373,691 fans poured in for the Boxing Day Tests throughout the five days of absorbing cricket. It incidentally recorded the highest attendance for any Test played in recent times.

Harish Rao

With the growing Indian population, there has been a shift in the administrative set-up too. Harish Rao, who has roots, including cricketing ones in Chennai, became the first Indian-Australian to be appointed on the board of Cricket Victoria in its close to 150-year history. The Indian diaspora has become a pivotal part of Australian cricket and it is increasing every series.

It all started in 2022 when India-Pakistan T20 World Cup match was played in front of a capacity crowd of 90,293. India won and Australia realised the growing popularity among the Indian fans. The same year India and Australia signed the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement. Realising the significance of the Indian diaspora, Cricket Victoria contacted Harish, an Indian Australian Business leader, who founded the Australia India Chamber of Commerce, and was a past board member of the Australia-India Institute before coming back to his cricketing roots.

Melbourne crowd during the Boxing Day match

"There's been a huge momentum in the Australia-India relationship over the last few years, especially after the signing of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement in 2022. That has filtered through to many different aspects of relationships and certainly sport," Harish explains.

While Harish is on an exciting journey himself, it has also helped him connect to the sport which has been a big part of his family. His great grandfather B S Ramulu Naidu captained "Presidency Hindus" versus "Presidency Europeans" in the Madras Presidency match at the now M A Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai in 1908-09. Harish's grandfather, B S Badradi played first-class cricket for Madras alongside M J Gopalan, C P Johnstone, and A G Ram Singh. P15